

## Civil War Book Review

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### Paper Chase: Texas Senate's Civil War Proceedings Reveal Ironic Twists'

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## **Review**

### **PAPER CHASE**

#### **Texas Senate's Civil War proceedings reveal ironic twists'**

**Parrish, T. Michael**

**Summer 1999**

**Spaw, Patsy McDonald** *The Texas Senate, Volume II: Civil War to the Eve of Reform, 1861-1889*. Texas A & M University Press, ISBN 890968578

The second installment in an ambitious series that chronicles the history of the upper house of the Lone Star State's legislative branch, this massive volume covers the most tumultuous years in Texas history.

The handiwork of a dozen or more members of the Senate Engrossing and Enrolling Department (plus historian Richard McCaslin, who receives special credit), the book stands as a monument to the men who served in the Texas Senate during the upheaval of Civil War, Reconstruction, Redemption, and the early glimmer of Progressivism or "that period sometimes called the Era of Reform." This volume follows an earlier one covering the years of the Texas Revolution and Republic through early statehood and secession.

"Like the first volume," general editor Patsy McDonald Spaw explains in the preface, "the book is an informal reference work giving biographical information about members of the Senate, and describing issues of the day and Senate procedures used to address those issues. We have attempted to present the facts in an evenhanded manner and with minimal editorial comment, letting the facts speak for themselves."

Reinforcing this editorial approach for the particularly bitter, violent, and racially divisive events of Reconstruction, Spaw continues, "Both good and evil deeds were committed during the Reconstruction period, and we leave to the reader the interpretation of their participants' words and acts."

With that purpose and style in mind, readers will probably not find this formidable tome as entertaining as it is informative. But in accomplishing their

avowed mission, the authors do indeed provide a bountiful harvest gleaned from hundreds of scattered and often obscure primary sources, including Senate journals, committee reports, letters and private papers, and newspapers.

One is left to speculate, however, on the exact sources used at any given point in the narrative, since neither footnotes nor endnotes are provided. Especially useful, however, are the several appendices listing all members of the Senate (from the Ninth through the 21st legislatures) with the districts they represented and the home towns and counties in their districts.

Texas's role in the Confederate war effort is revealed by the Senate's increasingly urgent business in meeting pressing demands for Confederate military manpower, munitions, and other resources, and countering the economic strain and public trauma resulting from the Union blockade and the presence of enemy forces at several points along the coast. Many Texas senators served as military officers during the war, and their wartime activities receive full attention throughout.

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of this volume's biographical focus arises from the many unlikely and ironic twists in the careers of these men. For example, William H. Parsons, an ardent secessionist who achieved fame as the commander of Parsons's Texas Brigade in the war, became a Radical Republican during Reconstruction, joining with blacks to press for their full civil rights.

Arguing in support of the 15th Amendment to secure federally guaranteed voting rights for blacks, Parsons asserted: "It is more honorable for us as a man, to now affiliate, as we do, with the party which conquered us, than again affiliate with the party that betrayed us." That kind of revelation underscores the unstable and unpredictable essence of the lives and times described so thoroughly and accurately in **The Texas Senate, Volume II**.

*T. Michael Parrish, an archivist at the Lyndon B. Johnson Library at the University of Texas at Austin, serves as president of the Society of Civil War Historians.*